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Giving one's life to the cause of Islam and Iran

View from

**Inside
Iran**

Special to The Christian Science Monitor

Shush, Iran

A woman's eyes flash from under her all-enveloping black *chador* as she stands outside the ruins in this 6,000-year-old Biblical town near the Iraqi border.

"I am proud that my son has given his life for the cause of Islam," she says, explaining that she is on a tour of the war zone arranged for families of *shahids* (martyrs) in Iran's war against Iraq.

"Three of my sons have already been *shahid*, and when my youngest gets old enough, I'll send him to the front also," she explains.

Although glorification of martyrdom for the faith is common to all Muslims, it is a central theme for Shiite Muslims.

(Afghan guerrillas, most of whom are Sunni Muslims, also extol martyrdom in their "holy war" against Soviet occupation forces.)

"We are a people who cherish the hope of martyrdom," posters in Tehran proclaim.

Some Westerners condemn this attitude as a "grisly obsession with death."

For Shiites, the willingness to sacrifice oneself derives from a strong belief in the holiness of struggle against injustice.

This belief is particularly powerful in Iran, where the resurgence of Shiism since the 1979 Islamic revolution has inspired Shiite Muslims in Lebanon and elsewhere in the Muslim world. That revolution overthrew Iran's Shah, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi.

The Shiites' powerful model is the third imam (spiritual leader), Hussein, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad.

Hussein was killed on the plains of Karbala, Iraq, along with all of his followers while leading a rebellion against the Caliph Yazid, whom they regarded as tyrannical and unjust.

The tragedy is reenacted in passion plays throughout the Shiite world on the important religious occasion of Ashura, the anniversary of Hussein's death. Pro-

cessions of black-shirted men chant mournfully and flagellate their backs with chains.

The message behind these age-old rituals — that one should have the courage to fight against the powerful and the oppressive — was activated during the Iranian revolution and more recently in the Iran-Iraq war.

During the revolution, Iranians were inspired by slogans invoking the memory of Hussein; some Iranians called him the real leader of the revolution.

The Ashura processions turned into demonstrations, with participants chanting "Death to the Shah" along with traditional mourning couplets.

Iranians called the Shah "Yazid," after Hussein's enemy, as they do Iraqi President Saddam Hussein now.

As they did during the revolution, Iranians continue to respond positively to the call to die for what they regard as the cause of the just against the unjust in the war against Iraq. The word *shahid* means not only martyr but "eternal witness for the truth."

For many Iranians, an obvious arena for the struggle between the two forces is their age-old need for resistance against foreign encroachment.

Iran has been the victim of wave after wave of foreign invaders — from Alexander the Great (who captured Shush when it was the winter capital of the Persian King Darius) to the Arabs and the Mongols.

The interference of European powers during the 19th and 20th centuries and heavy United States involvement in Iran following World War II are seen as the most recent episodes of humiliating foreign domination.

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During the revolution, sounding a popular theme, Ayatollah Khomeini said, "Today we are suffering from the world's powers. Never has Iran suffered so much."

The most recent foreign intrusion was the 1980 invasion by Iraq. Willingness to be a martyr in the war is especially strong among rural Iranians, many of whom are devoutly religious.

"There are just as many boys from our village volunteering to go to the warfront as at the beginning of the war," says a farmer in a village outside of Isfahan. "Any time Imam Khomeini makes a request on TV, more will go — with our blessing."

Among ethnic and religious minorities, however, the willingness to die for what is perceived as the cause of the Khomeini regime has never been strong.

While riding a bus near the war zone, this reporter overheard a Kurd remarking to his friend as they saw coffins being loaded onto a van, "There's no way they're going to get me to be a *shahid*."

Iranian women are not allowed to fight at the battlefield. Nonetheless, many proclaim their general support for Khomeini and his policies by declaring their willingness to die for him.

"The Iranian people love Imam Khomeini very much," an intense young woman student at a prayer meeting in the university in *Mashhad* told me.

"If he dies, we will die. I would give my life if it would add to the length of his life."